

Robert Pirie, bibliophile - obituary

American banker-lawyer who built up a unique collection of English 16th and 17th-century books



Robert Pirie (with blue tie)

6:59PM GMT 05 Feb 2015

Robert Pirie, who has died aged 80, was one of America's leading banker-lawyers during the mergers and acquisitions goldrush at the end of the last century; he was successively chief executive and president of Rothschild in North America, and a senior managing director of Bear Stearns.

Privately, however, he was one of the world's leading book collectors, who over six decades built up the finest collection of English 16th and 17th-century literature in private hands. His library included one of three known copies of the first edition of Bacon's *Essays* (1597); a Second Folio of Shakespeare (1632) in the armorial binding of the publisher's son-in-law; and a copy of Ben Jonson's *Workes* (1616), presented by the editor to the Queen of Bohemia.

He also had no hesitation in buying the copy of Isaac Newton's *Opticks* which had been presented by the author to the Astronomer Royal, Edmond Halley.

Good early copies of books by such authors are rare survivals, particularly if they have significant provenances, so a collector must be ready to pounce when they become available. With the world's leading experts and dealers as his friends, Pirie collected with knowledge and discrimination.

Robert S Pirie (whose middle initial did not denote a middle name) was born in Chicago on May 8 1934, the son of Robert Skirving Pirie and Mary Elizabeth Borden Pirie, who was the sister-in-law of Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1952 and 1956.

After the Hotchkiss School, Connecticut, he studied at Harvard College and then Harvard Law School. Having begun collecting T S Eliot, he was drawn to the great archive of his writings in Harvard's Houghton Library. There, the librarian, Bill Jackson, taught him to appreciate Elizabethan books, and Pirie transferred his bibliophile ambitions to John Donne and his contemporaries.

Soon afterwards, on manoeuvres in Germany during his US Army service, the young Lieutenant Pirie received a catalogue from London offering Donne's Devotions, and drove 15 miles in a Jeep to secure it.

His friendships in the rare book world proved crucial when "the single most interesting book of Donne's in existence" appeared on the market — the very rare Pseudo-Martyr, with a letter from Donne presenting it to his patron, Lord Ellesmere. Pirie could not afford it, so the bookseller put it in a bank vault until he could.



In 1972, Pirie's Donne collection furnished the greater part of an exhibition put on by the Grolier Club (America's oldest society of bibliophiles) for the poet's 400th anniversary. After working briefly for the chief justice of Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court, Pirie had begun his career as a corporate lawyer in Boston.

During a takeover in the early 1960s, he met one of the pioneers of mergers and acquisitions, Joseph Flom, whose firm he joined as a partner in 1973.

In 1968 Pirie worked for the campaign to elect the Democrat Eugene McCarthy as President, and four years later he was chief fundraiser when Senator Harold Hughes announced his intention to run. For his trouble Pirie appeared on Nixon's notorious "master list" of political opponents.

An American patrician of the old school, Pirie was a patron of academic, medical and artistic organisations. He lived on a farm outside Boston, sailed off Maine in the summer, and collected antique silver and French 18th-century porcelain.

His greatest appetite, though, was always for books and manuscripts, and despite concentrating on early English literature, his collection ranged from music by William Byrd to a draft outline of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*.

In 1982 he moved to New York to be chief executive officer at Rothschild, and two years later he was elected to book-collecting aristocracy, as one of the 40 members of the Roxburghe Club (founded 1812), the oldest society of bibliophiles in the world. By tradition, each member presents the others with copies of a privately printed edition of an item from his own library.



In 2002, Pirie presented an edition of Charles I's manuscript copy of Robert Naunton's *Fragmenta Regalia* (or *Observations on the late Q. Elizabeth, her Times and Favourites*). He also treated his fellows to a private exhibition.

As well as books from the libraries of Charles I and John Locke, it included letters from Hobbes, Dryden and the diarist John Evelyn – and one signed by Queen Mary and Philip II of Spain, asking Cosimo de Medici to inform the Pope that England had returned to the Roman Catholic fold.

At Christie's in London in 2004, Pirie crowned his collection of Donne by buying the great letter from the poet to Lady Kingsmill, written on October 26 1624, in consolation on the death of her husband. The letter is quoted in Isaac Walton's *Life of Donne* as an example of the finest style – and Pirie happened to own three copies of Walton's book, inscribed to friends.

Of the 38 autograph letters from Donne that still exist, only three are in private hands, so for a letter

that had sold for \$900 in 1948, Pirie paid more than \$150,000.

Robert Pirie’s marriage to Deirdre Howard was dissolved in 2000. He is survived by a son and a daughter. Another daughter died in 1997.

Robert Pirie, born May 8 1935, died January 15 2015



How we moderate

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2016